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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 TUNIS 000278

SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: TUNISIANS POSITIVE ON OBAMA ADMINISTRATION'S FIRST
100 DAYS BUT WANT RESULTS ON MIDDLE EAST PEACE

Classified By: Ambassador Robert F. Godec for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

Summary

¶1. (C) During meetings with a cross-section of society, Tunisians said they had high hopes for the Obama Administration, but were still waiting for concrete steps implementing President Obama's vision. Government officials, opposition parties and activists alike reacted favorably to Obama's speeches, the announced closing of Guantanamo, and the banning of torture. Their primary concern, however, was the Middle East Peace Process. They opined the Administration has thus far not delivered anything concrete to advance the Israeli-Palestinian peace process or to improve the humanitarian situation in Gaza. Tunisians expect a lot from the Obama Administration, but are withholding judgment until they see how the new Administration's principles translate into foreign policy. End Summary.

A Good Beginning, but...

¶12. (C) During two roundtables on May 8 and 11, held with a variety of current and former government officials, journalists, lawyers, ruling and opposition party members and NGOs, Tunisians told the Ambassador and DCM that the Obama Administration is off to a good start. Former Tunisian Ambassador to Russia Ahmed Ounaies opined that the world respects Obama's emphasis on dialogue. His overtures to countries such as Iran and Cuba, Ounaies said, showed the strength of his conviction. Tunisian parliamentarian and head of the Americas Caucus Tijani Haddad acknowledged that Obama faces many obstacles, namely the global economic crisis, Iraq, Afghanistan, and now the H1N1 virus. Still, Haddad seemed very taken with Obama's twin messages of hope and change, indicating that given time he thought Obama could overcome the challenges before him. Mohamed Marsit, President of Tunisia's Amnesty International Chapter, noted that Obama's statements on human rights-related issues were positive, but Marsit was unsure how those statements would translate into policy. Taoufik Bouderbala, former president and founding member of the Tunisian Human Rights League, stated that he too found Obama's statements positive. As for their implementation, he opined that he would rather be an optimist who was sometimes proven wrong than a pessimist who was always right.

¶13. (C) Editor-in-Chief of Realites Magazine Zied Krichen, however, opined that Obama's emphasis on dialogue might be construed as a sign of weakness. The problem with dialogue, he said, is that it sometimes becomes difficult to determine who is leading and who is being led during an exchange. He expressed concern that countries such as China and Cuba would take advantage of Obama's overtures to advance their own

agendas. Ambassador Ounaies and the other participants strongly disagreed with Krichen's assessment. Ounaies went so far as to say that only the strong can offer to listen to others, and he hoped his own government would one day be secure enough to solicit the opinions of others, including dissenting voices inside Tunisia, following the example of the United States. For her part, Emma Ben Arab, a member of the Chamber of Deputies, opined that the Obama administration should respect the sovereignty of states, and learn from the "mistakes" of the Bush Administration that democratic change can not be imposed. Former Secretary General of the opposition Progressive Democratic Party (PDP) Nejib Chebbi retorted that it was true that change could only come from within, but when groups interested in affecting lawful change were prevented from doing so by the government, the world should not shut its eyes. He and others expressed concern at what they perceived to be a policy shift on the part of the Obama Administration to give less emphasis to democracy promotion.

... Tired of "Slogans" on Middle East Peace

¶4. (C) The general consensus was that Obama's election was interpreted as a positive signal in the Arab World, but that there is great skepticism about whether he will be able to deliver on Middle East peace, which, in the end would be their measure of his success. Almost all interlocutors underscored the importance of genuine reconstruction in Gaza, with several expressing impatience at the lack of concrete actions thus far, which they attributed to Israeli

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intransigence and US hesitation to push the GOI. In addition, Ounaies made an emotional appeal that the United States publicly express to Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu and Foreign Minister Lieberman that their opposition to the creation of a Palestinian state is unacceptable, as is their rejection of the roadmap. "Imagine what you would be saying if Hamas were to make such statements!" he exclaimed. "We are tired of the slogan of 'two states - Israel and Palestine - living side by side in peace and security,'" he continued. "Without actions to help bring it about, it just reminds us of the failed policies of the Bush Administration."

¶5. (C) Mohamed Ali Halouani, a member of the opposition at-Tajdid party, noted that pushing the peace process was not simply the responsibility of the United States, and that other Arab states should step up to the plate as well. In response to these interventions, the Ambassador and other Embassy officials underscored President Obama's commitment to Middle East Peace, as evidenced by his and Secretary Clinton's naming of Senator Mitchell as Special Envoy. They also noted his three visits to the region, including his April visit to Tunisia.

Comment

¶6. (C) Tunisians, government and non-government actors alike, are enthralled with the Obama Administration. They like him, they like his policy (so far), and they like what he represents. They understand that 100 days is not a lot of time, but they are eager to see how his policy towards the Middle East unfolds. Their final opinion of him will be greatly influenced by how he approaches the issue of Israel, Palestine, and the Peace Process. End Comment.

Godec